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Government says sulfur dioxide around Limetree Bay refinery is causing St. Croix stench, Limetree officials disagree

By SUZANNE CARLSON Daily News Staff 10 hrs ago





Limetree bay officials are disputing reports that sulfur dioxide released from the refinery is the source of a stench that has prevailed over St. Croix for days.

Daily News file photo

Government officials say air quality testing on St. Croix Saturday showed elevated levels of sulfur dioxide — the chemical that Limetree Bay refinery officials have been insisting they’re not required to monitor — but Limetree said Sunday their tests contradict the government’s findings.

The news comes after days of complaints of a stench so powerful, that the St. Croix Bureau of Motor Vehicles and three schools were forced to close Thursday and Friday.

“Preliminary air quality testing conducted by the Virgin Islands National Guard Civil Support Team Saturday found elevated levels of sulfur dioxide in the air near the Limetree Bay Refinery,” according to a statement issued Saturday night by Government House Communications Director Richard Motta Jr.



The National Guard team did not find any elevated levels of sulfur dioxide on Sunday and plan to continue monitoring the area today.

Short-term exposure to elevated levels of sulfur dioxide “can harm the human respiratory system and make breathing difficult,” and people with asthma and children are particularly sensitive to the effects, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

On Sunday, Limetree Bay spokeswoman Erica Parsons issued a press release contradicting the government’s statement.

“In response to community concerns and to support efforts by the U.S. Virgin Islands government to identify the source of recent odor complaints, industrial hygiene specialists at Limetree Bay conducted air monitoring beginning Friday and continuing through Saturday evening at five locations immediately to the West and Northwest of the refinery,” according to the statement.

“This air monitoring detected zero concentration of hydrogen sulfide, zero concentration of sulfur dioxide and zero concentration of hydrocarbons. The results of this monitoring have been shared with the Department of Planning and Natural Resources,” Parsons wrote. “Limetree Bay remains committed to cooperating fully with the local and federal government to identify the source of the odor and will work to immediately address any findings identified from the odor investigation that are attributable to the refinery.”

Limetree Bay had a network of five ambient air quality monitors designed to detect the presence of sulfur dioxide. But the monitors have not been in use since 2012, when the refinery shut down over similar concerns about chemical leaks threatening public and environmental health and safety.

According to an EPA notice of violation of the Clean Air Act issued on May 3, Limetree had operated the five sulfur

dioxide monitors prior to the shutdown in 2012, and company officials assured federal regulators that they would be used if and when the facility reopened. Limetree began restarting refinery operations in September, but EPA personnel confirmed during a site visit on April 30 that Limetree has not been operating the monitors.

Refinery officials initially balked at being required to resume air monitoring, despite complaints from area residents about sickening smells coming from the refinery.

“We strongly disagree with the claim that we are in violation of any ambient air monitoring requirement,” according to a statement issued by Parsons on May 3. “We meet all the monitoring requirements of our existing permit(s).”

A PAL, or “plantwide applicability limit” permit had been issued in Dec. 2020, but was withdrawn by the EPA in March before it went into effect, so the company was not required to resume air quality monitoring that was included in the PAL permit, according to Parsons.

“The former refinery operator was required to perform area monitoring, but that requirement was linked exclusively to their burning of sulfur-containing residual fuel oil, which Limetree Bay does not do,” she added in the May 3 statement.

But on Wednesday, only two days after denying responsibility for air monitoring, refinery officials reversed course.

“Limetree Bay has voluntarily agreed to reactivate the five area monitors that were put in place prior to our ownership of the refinery to detect sulfur dioxide in ambient air,” Jeff Rinker, Limetree Bay chief executive officer, said in a prepared statement.

“While Limetree Bay is not required to perform this air monitoring under our existing permits, we are committed to being a responsible part of the St. Croix community and believe this investment will help build trust in our operations.”

Wednesday is also when residents began noticing an overwhelming odor that has left many feeling ill for days, but the refinery initially denied responsibility in a Facebook post at 12:20 p.m.: “Our preliminary investigations have revealed that units are operating normally, and there is no activity that would result in an odor.”

Parsons issued another statement Thursday saying that “Limetree Bay has become aware of an odor affecting areas west of the facility. We are conducting maintenance activity at the Coker unit, which has resulted in light hydrocarbon odors.”

Gov. Albert Bryan Jr. and several government officials held a conference call with reporters Friday, where they explained they still did not know what was causing the smell, and were bringing in additional equipment and resources to do testing.

By Saturday Motta said it was clear — the odor is sulfur dioxide.

Testing “found elevated quantities of Sulfur Dioxide in the air near the refinery, which has narrowed the investigation to the small industrial corridor on the island’s south shore that includes the refinery, the Diageo Rum Distillery, Anguilla Landfill, and the Asphalt Plant north of the landfill. However, readings conducted outside the other facilities Saturday did not provide any elevated readings of harmful chemical constituents,” according to the statement from Motta.

The refinery “did not identify a particular upset,” Motta added, and “based on the chemical constituents present in the atmosphere, the team’s investigation continues to center on the refinery but has not ruled out other sources.”

The EPA provided the local government with additional air quality monitoring instruments, which arrived Saturday and “will be utilized by the Department of Planning and Natural Resources and the EPA and will be deployed throughout the island to conduct continuous air quality monitoring in support of confirming the exact source of the odor,” according to Motta. “Once the source is confirmed and identified, the Government’s Unified Command team will take definitive action to eliminate the source and seek appropriate remedies and penalties with the appropriate parties.”

Residents with respiratory ailments such as allergies, lung disease, or asthma are strongly encouraged to consider staying indoors or taking other protective actions, Motta said.

On Friday, Sen. Samuel Carrion called on the refinery to shut down until the cause of the odor can be determined, but the local and federal governments have allowed Limetree Bay to remain in operation despite ongoing complaints about the stench.

Anyone with questions or who wishes to make a report of the gaseous odor is asked to call DPNR at 340-773-1082 ext. 2221 or the Environmental Health Division at 340-718-1311 ext. 3709.

The EPA has created a website specifically for information related to the investigation into Clean Air Act violations at Limetree Bay: epa.gov/vi/limetree-bay-terminals-and-limetree-bay-refining-llc.

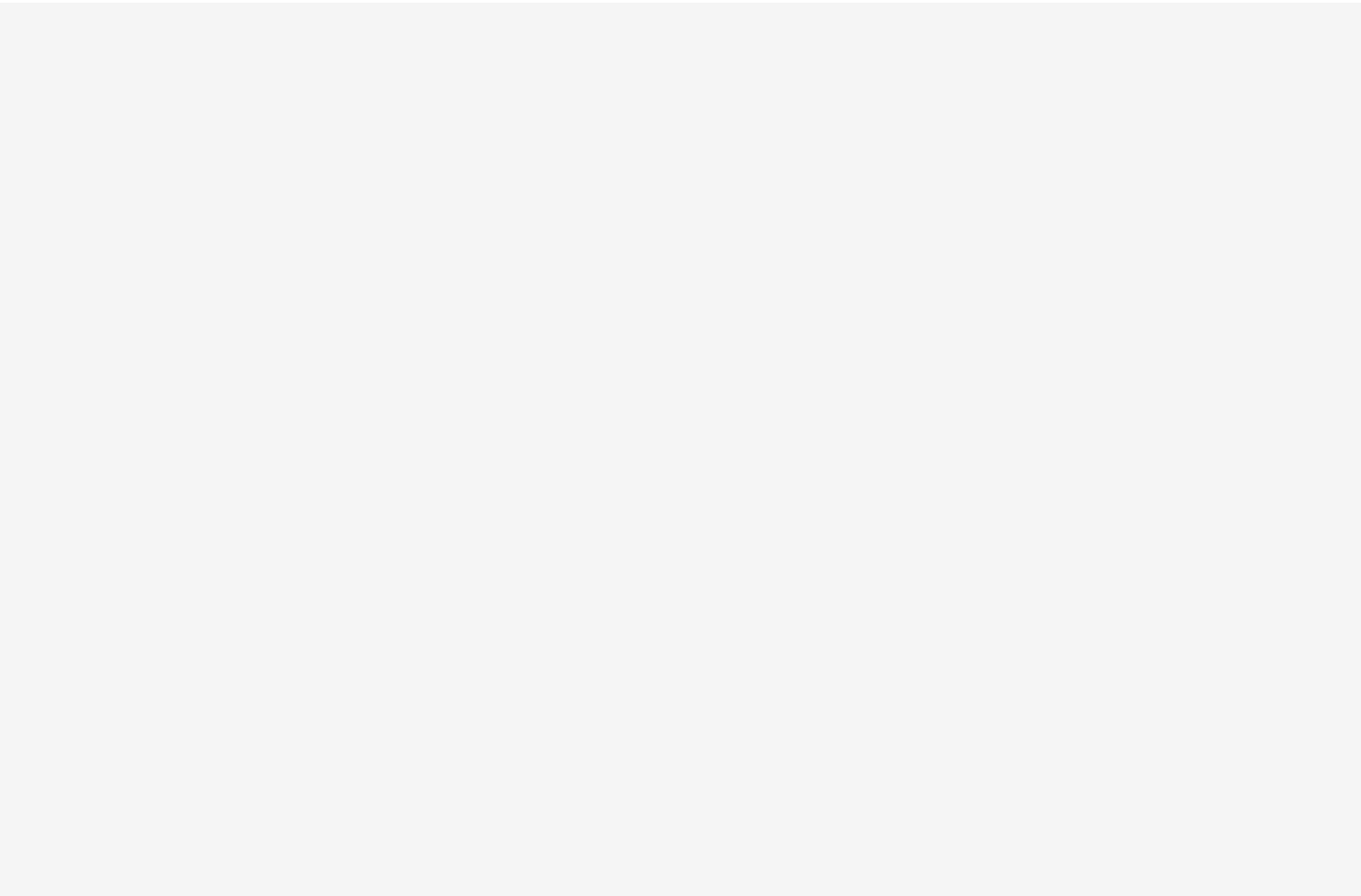
The EPA community contact is Zeno Bain at 571-289-9450 or Bain.Zeno@epa.gov. Residents can also contact the Limetree Bay Command Center at 340-692-3000.

The V.I. government’s response team will be conducting tests in neighborhoods around the refinery today.

— Contact Suzanne Carlson at 340-714-9122 or email scarlson@dailynews.vi.

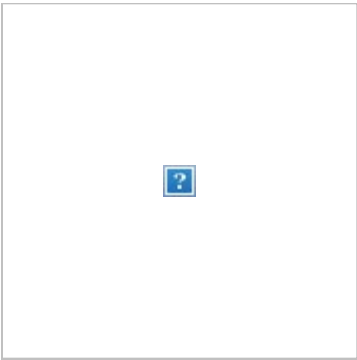


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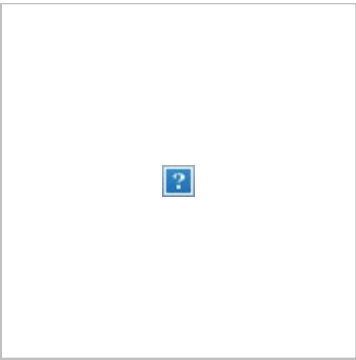


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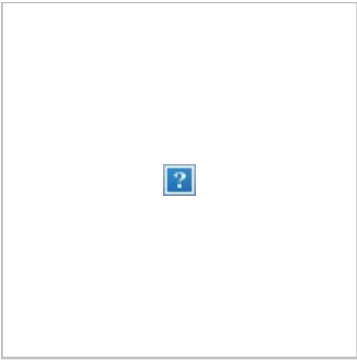


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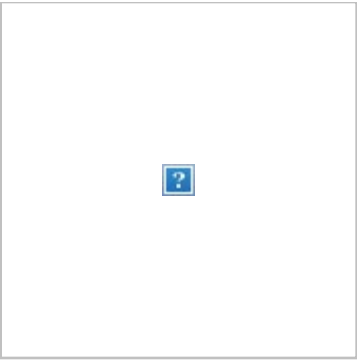
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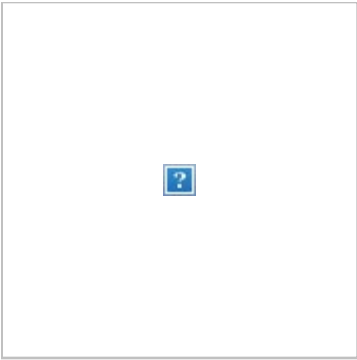
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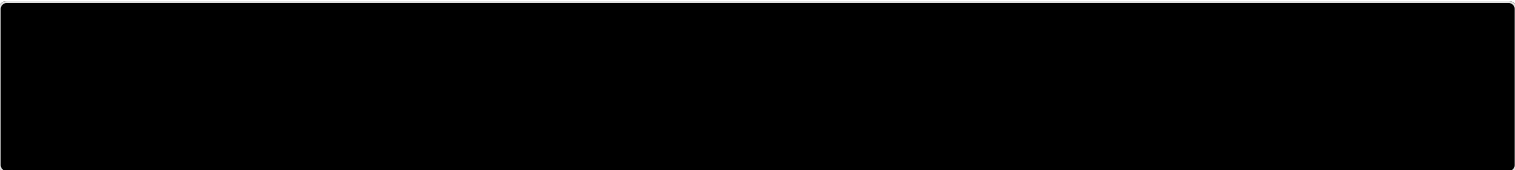
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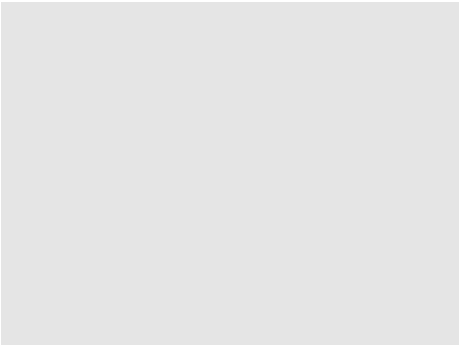
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